



The Campaign for "Disabled Access Friendly" Schools

I first of all would like to thank the ELT News for reprinting the article "A day in the life of a disabled person" first published in Athens news. Issue No. 13,368. As we sit and read such articles, it is all too easy to acknowledge the systemic failures within our country's domestic infrastructure and platitudes rather than action regarding its treatment of disabled persons.

However, before any moral high ground is taken, and I promise that from my position it would be difficult to take any higher ground, just look around yourself now. Are you sitting in the school, the teacher's room, the owner's office, or an empty classroom? If I was to try and come to see you right now, would I be independently, without assistance, be able to come and see you? Or would you, as often happens have to have a professional or social meeting with me on the pavement outside a coffee shop, in the lobby of a hotel or would there need to be some elaborate plan to get me into the building, which would involve me being carried up flights of stairs with my eyes shut in order to meet you on your ground.

Schools in any shape or form, whether they be state, or profit making Foreign Language Centres are schools. They are places where the young come to be taught not just about tenses, levels of written and spoken politeness but are rich places of soil in which if we plant and nurture the right seeds we can watch students grow and become sensitive, empowered and involved members of the community.

In my now nearly twenty years in all aspects of the ELT field, I have seen schools which have taken sterling efforts to encompass those who are physically challenged and have seen those students perform to the highest degree and are a credit to themselves and the schools who had the foresight to make the necessary adjustments to allow students access to education.

However, how many students remain home-schooled or do not try at all due to the fact that ELT education in there area is inaccessible. Only by showing our students ourselves that persons with disabilities do not have to be an invisible, whispered about minority but a vibrant and valued member of the classroom and society can we expect future generations to make the changes that politicians so easily find sound bites for, but fail to put into practice today.

I am fully aware that a large number of Foreign Language Centres were not originally established as such but were adapted later -however, the blunt truth is they are now schools and should be treated with the respect that the world school implies.

Every school is different and every school would have to carry out varying degrees of change to enable their schools to be called "Disabled Access-Friendly". Obviously, in this time of the credit crunch what changes each one of us can make is dependent on the capital we have for investment, but planning for

change, and making that first step on wanting to become a school that embraces the whole community is a gigantic one.

Let me pose you this question, it's not an easy one but an honest one. How many of you would hire a teacher in a wheelchair? The answer to the question is yours and yours alone and you would know the reasons why. But think how many of you know what might happen tomorrow?

Talking now in practical terms, run through the checklist below and see if a physically challenged potential student, parent, examiner, or publishing representative would have accessibility at your school's door:

- Is there a step at the front of the school or a ramp?
- Is the lift large enough to fit the average with wheelchair (60cm width) and close effectively?
- Does the reception desk have a lower section that could deal with both those who are wheelchair bound, not to mention our younger learners?
- How many classroom doors could a disabled person actually get through -or to the different levels of the school?
- Do you have at least one classroom in which a student could easily fit behind a desk?
- Do you have a classroom in which the wheelchair bound teacher could make themselves available to the students by being able to freely get up and down the aisle?
- Is the whiteboard suitably positioned so that the student or teacher could actually use it?
- In the staffroom, is the material for the teacher at an accessible height so that they do not feel reliant on others to do their job?
- Is there at least one restroom that could be used or converted to the use of the disabled person?- Hours of teaching with no toilet break is no easy task (you soon forget about focusing on students' learning styles and focus on something else.)
- Does the local community know that you are a "Disabled-Access Friendly" school?

Of course, in a realistic world we know not all of these can be achieved immediately, but also we know that in our schools one or more of these changes can be implemented and a blank refusal to acknowledge that is turning a blind eye to the problem and to the large number of currently disempowered students and disabled members of the ELT world.

One of my ideas is that schools should start to raise the awareness of their local community by taking bold steps by leading their communities.

Schools who feel they are "Disabled-Access Friendly" by fulfilling some, if not all of the above criteria, should be able to display a "Disabled-Access Friendly" sticker in their windows and on their advertising material, proclaiming that they are aware and have made or are planning to make adjustments to encompass all of the community. - For a copy of the campaign's "Disability -Access Friendly" stickers download from www.thelab.com.gr - personal thanks to Nina Reeves and partner for their volunteering to take on this project.

This should be a **self-regulatory scheme**, where schools on their own good consciousness make this declaration. There could be no worse marketing than making such a declaration and then not living up to your side of the bargain.

The "Disability-Access Friendly" scheme is one that I am already taking to both local governments and national governments with the aim of increasing accessibility for disabled people in both public and

private facilities and I believe that ELT schools have the ability to show the way. I am also approaching ELT institutions to seek their endorsement of the campaign.

Why not follow the wonderful example of the British Council in Athens in compiling young peoples' concerns regarding the environment which were sent and acknowledged by the Prime Minister, prior to the Copenhagen summit. Raise you communities awareness of the disability issue by

- allowing students to comply surveys regarding accessibility
- conducting surveys in the local area: shops, cafes, supermarkets, banks etc
- collating the results and writing reports both
- sending them both to the local government and national government
- sending the results to the local press

Let's truly put the EFL centres on own communities' maps and allow our students to know that education does empower and can enforce changes and students will have felt listened to. If you feel that you would like to join the campaign or contribute in any way then please feel free to contact me or why not join the Facebook group **Greek "Disabled-Access Friendly"**.

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